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ABSTRACT

Five papers address issues in the current debate in the United Kingdom over standards in higher education, especially the "Graduate Standards" program of the Higher Education Quality Council. The first paper, an introduction by John Brennan, identifies key issues in the standards debate such as the role of mass education, the various types of standards (academic, service, program, graduate, process, outcomes, intrinsic, extrinsic, explicit, and implicit), standard setting versus assessing the standard of achievement, issues of explicitness in standards, the stigma of failure, and comparability in standards. The next paper, "Academic Standards and the External Examiner System," by Harold Silver and Ruth Williams, discusses whether the external examiner has a role in ensuring comparability of academic standards across the higher education sector and reports on a survey of educators in which most respondents indicated their belief that the present system is becoming unworkable. The third paper, "Standards and Employment," by Malcolm Frazier, focuses on occupational standards at the graduate or professional level and compares these with academic qualifications. In the fourth paper, "Degree Standards and Quality Assurance: A Discussion," Robin Middlehurst identifies issues on the Graduate Standards Program which are being addressed by the Higher Educational Quality Council and offers a framework for the ongoing articulation, assurance, and development of standards. (Individual papers contain references.) (DB)

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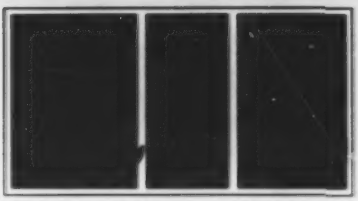

QUALITY SUPPORT CENTRE

ED 393 360

Changing Conceptions of Academic Standards

by John Brennan, Malcolm Frazer, Robin Middleburst, Harold Silver and Ruth Williams

HE 029 032

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Quality Support Centre
Higher Education Report No 4

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Changing Conceptions of Academic Standards

by John Brennan, Malcolm Frazer, Robin Middlehurst, Harold Silver and Ruth Williams

Quality Support Centre
Higher Education Report No 4

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Foreword

This is the fourth in a series of reports published by the Quality Support Centre (QSC) of the Open University on issues concerned with quality in higher education. For information about Reports No 1, No 2 and No 3 please see the details about other QSC publications contained at the back of this report.

The Quality Support Centre was formed out of the research, development and information services of the Council for National Academic Awards at the end of 1992. It seeks to provide an independent voice on questions of quality in higher education. As well as publications, it undertakes projects and consultancy work and organises an annual programme of conferences and workshops on higher education themes.

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1 INTRODUCTION: THE STANDARDS DEBATE

John Brennan

In his recent book, Peter Scott has argued that Britain has created a mass higher education *system* while retaining an elite higher education *mentality* (Scott, 1995). The current debate about standards may reflect the tensions between higher education as it is developing in practice and the ways in which we continue to think about higher education.

Higher education is marked by increasing diversity of types of institutions, of programmes of study, of student characteristics, of awards and qualifications. New concepts such as 'credit', 'competences', 'units', 'transferable skills', 'learning society' co-exist with older notions of 'disciplines', 'knowledge', 'truth', 'intellectual rigour' in discourses on higher education. Concepts of 'standards' are central to any contemporary higher education discourse. But is there one or several discourses going on? And is there one or several conceptions of standards?

The 'Graduate Standards' programme of the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) promises to extend and refine our conceptions of standards and to place them centre stage in future approaches to quality assurance and public accountability. Whether this will further underline and make more explicit the considerable diversity which exists in British higher education or whether it will lead to greater 'standardisation' and more explicit 'comparability' remains to

be seen. As with most policy initiatives in higher education, the outcomes of the HEQC initiative on standards may be different from its intentions.

The papers which follow in this report address the question of higher education standards from contrasting standpoints. The first paper, by Harold Silver and Ruth Williams, draws on their recent national study of external examining to raise questions about the possibility of maintaining comparability of *academic standards* - as implicitly and traditionally understood in the academic community - in a much expanded and diversified higher education system. In the second paper, Malcolm Frazer considers the applicability to higher education of defining and measuring *occupational standards*, examining the approach taken by the former Employment Department and currently being implemented by the National Council for Vocational Qualifications.

Do these divergent academic and occupational approaches to questions of standards have any bearing on each other? Frazer clearly thinks not. He is at pains to draw distinctions, not just between academic and occupational standards but also between professional and vocational standards. But there is at least one sense in which the approaches may come to converge. Loss of confidence in the implicit and largely consensual approach to standards within the academic community when coupled with growing calls for greater public accountability in higher education may lead in the direction of greater explicitness of definition, greater attention to measurement of the kind already being promoted in the area of vocational qualifications. Such developments are

strongly hinted at in the final paper in this volume by Robin Middlehurst. Locating her argument in the broader contexts of expanded and diversified higher education and the accompanying requirements for greater accountability for the use of public monies, she sets out the different elements which will need to be addressed for the "articulation, assurance and development of standards" in higher education in the future. The overall direction is towards greater explicitness and, with it, wide-ranging consequences for the exercise of responsibility and control over academic processes at all levels within the higher education system.

Attempts to address the "broad comparability of academic standards" and to "define the skills of graduates" are likely to prove to be complex, time-consuming and controversial tasks. Some of the difficulties are referred to in the rest of this paper.

What is the standards debate about ?

The current debate was triggered by a speech from the Secretary of State for Education. It cannot be divorced from the broader debates about the roles and responsibilities in quality assurance of institutions, HEQC and the funding councils and, more generally, about the respective responsibilities of the state and of higher education in steering the future direction of higher education. It is a debate about coming to terms with mass higher education in Britain, about retaining (or perhaps regaining) confidence in a higher education system no longer characterised by exclusiveness of entry, in a system with a plurality of purposes and clients and which is often only imperfectly understood, even by those working in it. However, some contributions to the debate appear to be confusing a number of rather different things. In

so far as there is confusion, it may derive from the attempt to combine perspectives which derive from traditional assumptions about *academic standards in higher education* with perspectives which derive from the assumptions of *contemporary quality management* - British Standards, TQM, Charters and the like. The latter are more likely to concern *service standards* - books in the library and so on - than academic standards.

The HEQC concern is with 'graduate standards'. These have been defined by HEQC as

> "explicit levels of academic attainment that are used to describe and measure academic requirements and achievements of individual students and groups of students" (HEQC, 1995, p4).

As such, they are distinct from the *standards of educational provision offered by institutions*. Standards are *set* by institutions and *achieved* by students. Indeed, in some formulations there is an inverse relationship between the two: "our standards are very high; most students fail the course".

A cursory examination of the use of the term 'standards' in higher education reveals a bewildering diversity of usage. In practice, the term is being used to refer to a variety of different things. The following are some of the main variants.

Academic standards v service standards

This has already been referred to above but requires further comment. Frequently, service standards refer to learning resource-related considerations - libraries, laboratories etc. - and to administrative support services such as admissions, counselling and careers. However, if academic standards are meant to refer to the standards of graduates' academic achievement, then all aspects of institutional provision might be regarded as service, in that they are intended to 'serve' the development of that academic achievement. In particular, teaching quality and institutional quality assurance arrangements - ie. the objects of current external quality review - would be crucial elements of service standards.

Programme standards v graduate standards

The current system of external quality assessment in the UK is about programme standards although sometimes inferences about graduate standards are made on the basis of judgements about programmes. (External validators of courses frequently face the dilemma of what to do about the interests of students on a 'bad' course? Are they to be denied the opportunity to obtain a degree?) The assessors' concerns about standards as reported in quality assessment reports - depth, breadth, progression, student autonomy, cohesion and relevance - are familiar concepts to academics. They refer to programme characteristics, not graduate characteristics.

Process standards v outcomes standards

Programme standards influence graduate standards through the learning opportunities which they provide. Thus, references are sometimes made, for example, to the 'demanding' or 'challenging' nature of students' course

experiences. They are given 'difficult' things to do. In contrast, some courses may be 'soft options'. Such statements refer to characteristics of the educational *processes* encountered by students on a course or programme. They are not the same thing as the *outcomes* of knowledge, skills and dispositions which students may be expected to possess at the *end* of a course.

Intrinsic v extrinsic standards

Assurance that proper graduate standards are being obtained sometimes relies on external authorities. The views of employers and professional bodies are frequently cited as evidence that a course's standards are 'appropriate' or 'comparable'. This *extrinsic* approach, resting on judgements made by higher education consumer groups, contrasts with *intrinsic* considerations of academic standards as the expectations of the (usually subject-based) academic community and which are internally set within institutions and externally evaluated by external examiners and assessors.

The extrinsic:intrinsic distinction is sometimes applied at an *institutional* level. Thus, standards are *intrinsic* not to the norms and expectations of the academic community as a whole but to the mission and programme goals of a particular institution. This relativistic interpretation is at the heart of many of the arguments about external quality assessment. Carried to its extreme, it seems to preclude any possibility of comparability of standards across the higher education system.

Explicit v implicit standards

Conceptions of standards in higher education have rarely been explicit. Statements that standards are 'high' or 'comparable'

because of the satisfaction of employers and professional bodies do not necessarily say anything about what those standards actually are. (In the case of professional bodies, compliance to an explicit set of requirements can usually be assumed. However, such requirements themselves reflect many of the ambiguities to which reference has already been made. References to professional standards seem frequently to serve to close off rather than to illuminate discussion of standards.) Traditionally, external examiners' conceptions of standards have been implicit. Considerable attempts have been made to make funding council quality assessment explicit but a lot of the practice appears to have been implicit. Explicit statements of standards tend to be couched in terms of learning outcomes and graduate competences, but these differ greatly in the level of specificity and detail provided.

Standard setting v assessing the standard of achievement

Within the institutional autonomy of British higher education, institutions are responsible for the *setting* of standards as well as for the *assessment* of the standards of student achievement. Traditionally, both processes have been approached implicitly and privately by small groups of academics who would normally share a common disciplinary framework of knowledge and values that would be utilised in the standard setting and assessment process. Developments such as modularity and quality assurance have tended to make both processes more explicit and more public. The linkage between standard setting and assessing the standard of achievement, however, frequently remains problematic. Student assessment is generally norm-referenced rather than criterion-referenced and depends on private consensual judgements made within specialist disciplinary territories.

Of course, other distinctions can be made. Course documentation in one university referred to professional standards, academic standards, employability standards, personal and common skills standards, enterprise and transferable skills standards and scheme operations standards. Such distinctions reach into the heart of the educational process which, until now, has been regarded as the 'private life' of higher education. Precise definitions and measurement of standards will undoubtedly open up this private life to greater scrutiny than has happened hitherto. In doing so, the professional autonomy of the individual academic will tend to be ceded to the collective authority of the higher education institution, if not to the external authority of national agencies and government departments.

How explicit to be?

Standards in higher education have traditionally been implicit. Professors in great universities *knew* what they were. Those who were fortunate enough to be close to the professors could begin to understand what those standards were. The authority of external examiners was predicated on their seniority and experience within the academic profession and their exposure to its implicit notions of standards.

The shared understandings of an academic elite are insufficient as a basis for standards in a mass system of higher education. Hence, the current debate about standards. One response is to be more explicit in articulating expectations of both institutions and students; the former through developments such as Students' Charters, the latter by emphasising learning outcomes and competences.

An extreme example of the latter is found in the Goals Inventories developed by the National Centre on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning and Assessment at Pennsylvania State University in the United States (Jones, 1994). The goals are grouped into three categories:

(i) critical thinking;
(ii) speech communication;
(iii) writing.

Each inventory is sub-divided into a number of categories of graduate competences. Thus, the critical thinking inventory refers to interpretational skills, analysis, evaluation, inference, presenting argument skills, reflectiveness and disposition. Each is further sub-divided so that interpretational skills can be broken down into categorising, detecting indirect persuasion and clarifying meaning. Specific statements of graduate competences are then listed. An example of *categorising* is that graduates should be able to "classify and group data, findings, and opinions on the basis of their attributes or a given criterion". An example of *detecting indirect persuasion* is that the graduates should be able to "detect 'if then' statements based on the false assumption that if the antecedent is true, so must be the consequence". An example of *clarifying meaning* is that the graduates can "recognise confusing, vague or ambiguous language that requires clarification to increase comprehension". The critical thinking goals inventory lists 83 such statements of graduates' competences.

The US researchers are not proposing that graduates be assessed in terms of several hundred distinct competences. The aim of the goals inventories is to obtain from stakeholders - academics, policy makers and employers - a view of the

importance which they attach to the different competences. Also, the three goals inventories - some 292 separate competences in all - relate only to generic educational goals. They do not address subject and professional goals and competences. But the example is indicative of where a competences-based approach might take us when applied to higher education. University graduates might well possess 292 separate competences but do conventional student assessment methods actually measure them? The United States approach to goals inventories shares some of the features of the measurement of occupational competences as set out in Frazer's paper in this report.

Another example of how information about the assessment of students can inform the assessment of programme or institutional quality comes from a comparative study of European undergraduate economics programmes. The study utilised peer review to compare ten economics programmes in Britain, Germany and the Netherlands (Brennan et al, 1992). Analysis of programme documentation revealed all sorts of differences between the programmes but in the main did not indicate whether there were differences in graduate standards. The one exception was the assessment materials which, in quantitative economics, indicated by virtue of the questions being set something of the standard of student achievement that was expected. This enabled the researchers to make the leap from describing programme characteristics to comparing academic standards.

Greater explicitness about standards brings with it a lot of problems. Potentially it is revolutionary. It is not just about redescribing what happens in higher education. Greater explicitness about graduate standards surely implies a greater readiness by institutions not to graduate those students whose

achievements fail to meet set targets and learning outcomes. Greater explicitness also implies clarity - both inside and outside higher education - in the meaning of degree classifications. While it is possible and legitimate to enquire into the complexities of what students learn as a result of their higher education, it should be remembered that the answers are also likely to be complex and, at best, tentative.

The stigma of failure

British higher education has frequently prided itself on its high retention and low wastage rates. Compared with most other higher education systems, a high proportion of British students graduate and they do so within the designated and relatively short period of study, justified historically by the specialist preparation provided by A levels. This distinctive feature of the British higher education system has been coupled in the eyes of many informed international commentators (eg Trow, 1994; Clark, 1995) with other characteristics of the British system, ie a small elite system with high unit costs. Yet the erosion of these latter features has not seemingly resulted in dramatic increases in student wastage.

Part of the reasons may lie in the stigma attached to failure which is part of the culture of the British educational system. A system based on elite sponsorship, to borrow Turner's classic distinction between *sponsored* and *contest* mobility (Turner, 1960), does not need to develop mechanisms for dealing with failure at its higher levels, ie for 'cooling out' the unsuccessful. Stringent pre-course selection virtually rules out the problem of in-course failure.

The rules of academic progression still current in most British universities are punitive regarding the consequences of failure at intermediate stages in a student's undergraduate career. Provisions for resits and resubmissions are limited. A student who does not reach the required standard today will have only limited opportunities of doing so tomorrow. Examination boards rightly do not fail students lightly. The seriousness of the practical consequences and resultant stigma of failure for the individual student are powerful incentives towards leniency. The traditions of the British honours degree programme allow little room for students to improve upon their performance. The 'normal' pattern of the undergraduate student career is not to fail things, not to repeat course units or years of study, but to complete the course successfully and in the minimum period of study. Can and should this be the normal pattern for the future?

Greater explicitness in the setting and assessment of standards will of itself not provide convincing assurance of standards. Assurance would come from a confidence that these standards were actually being applied by examiners and examination boards in all higher education institutions. Consistent application would be more likely if the consequences and stigma of failure were lessened, for students and institutions alike. Greater opportunities to retrieve a failure lessen the seriousness of that failure. A recognition that there may be legitimate educational reasons for low rates of progression and completion lessens the institutional fear that low rates will bring forth penalties. For some students, this will mean longer study periods in order to reach the required standards. For institutions and government, this will mean an apparent drop in efficiency. Both may be prices necessary for assurance that consistent standards are actually being applied across British higher education.

Standards and quality

Good quality education should maximise the opportunities for the student to learn. The extent and richness of what is learned is an achievement of the student. It will reflect both what he or she has brought into higher education as well as what has been acquired within it. Standards are set by higher education and achieved by students. It therefore follows that external quality assessment (of institutions) should concentrate on the standard setting process.

This implies a greater focus on student assessment. But it implies a focus not on assessment questions and answers but on the *criteria* used by examiners in determining what constitutes an acceptable answer. It is here that greater explicitness might most reasonably be required. Either, it will entail rendering the implicit more explicit, or, it will require the identification of assessment criteria where none previously existed. Neither seems an unreasonable request to make of higher education.

Systems of external assessment and assurance cannot but help address questions of standards, if only implicitly. Conceptions of academic standards underlie the criteria applied by peer assessors and auditors in reaching their judgements, albeit mediated by a sense of institutional missions and course objectives. Assessment and audit systems are based on a whole series of assumptions about the links which exist between the 'qualities' of educational provision and the standards of academic achievement reached by students who experience them. The hard evidence for the existence of such links is in fact quite poor (see, for example, Terenzini and Pascarella, 1994). What precisely are the course and institutional characteristics most closely associated with high

standards of graduate achievement? For external quality review systems to address these questions directly suggests a larger place for student assessment and achievement in external review processes, perhaps combined with altered roles and responsibilities of external examiners.

Does comparability matter?

Underlying the debate about standards is an implication that standards are falling, that there is no longer comparability of standards across the whole of British higher education. Arguably there never was genuine comparability, either between institutions or between subjects. Claims about falling standards would be more convincing if there was a clear baseline from which standards could be shown to have fallen. What convincing evidence do we have - apart from the assumptions of exclusivity - of the standards current in British higher education in, say, 1960?

The questions which are being raised about standards in British higher education today could probably have been asked at any time over the last century. And they would have been as difficult to answer then as now. Even if common national examinations were to be introduced, there is probably no way of knowing whether a first class degree from institution X represents the same standard of educational achievement as a first from institution Y. But the answers to such questions matter more today, partly because of the size and complexity of the higher education system and partly because of the greater importance of degree qualifications as tradable currency in educational and employment markets. Failure to provide answers may devalue the currency of the

degrees achieved by many students, particularly those who have studied in the less fashionable institutions.

Failure to answer them with evidence will lead to them being answered with prejudice and snobbery. Instead of replacing an elite with a mass system of higher education, we will have ended up with both, with exclusiveness of entry remaining the prime arbiter of standards.

This paper has drawn a distinction between graduate standards - which are ultimately the responsibility and achievement of students - and standard setting and service standards (broadly conceived) which are the responsibilities of institutions. In the current quality assurance arrangements, quality audit and quality assessment look primarily at service standards and external examiners look at standard setting and the standards of student achievement. The next paper looks at the conditions necessary for external examiners to fulfil their role effectively.

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II ACADEMIC STANDARDS AND THE EXTERNAL EXAMINER SYSTEM

Harold Silver and Ruth Williams

Introduction

The aim of this discussion is to explore the relationship between the external examiner system and academic standards, and in particular whether the external examiner has a role in ensuring comparability of academic standards across the higher education sector. The external examiner system is instrumental to academic standards, but explicit statements which outline what it is that is being set, maintained and compared have rarely been articulated, least of all by the institutions themselves, until recently.

When higher education was small enough, the possibility and validity of comparisons were implicit in the external examiner process:

> "Standards ... meant a consensus reached by internal and external examiners based on a number of assumptions. These (assumptions) have been largely about the possibility of identifying levels of attainment in a subject and across institutions which, whatever their differences, have been similar enough, with similar enough staffs and student intakes, curricula and forms of assessment, to enable consensus to be reached readily about courses and individual students" (Silver, 1995).

The external examiner was a means of legitimising that consensus and hence there was a notion that academic standards were *national*. However, higher education has grown and changed, and questions about academic standards and their comparability - the consensus - are being openly confronted.

It is important to address the argument that there is no longer a notion of a national academic standard for the first degree which external examiners help set, maintain and compare across the higher education sector (and it may be argued that in spite of assumptions and appearances there never has been). The question now is whether a variety of different academic standards are in fact present. Whether these are at different levels, that is different academic standards, what Barnett (1992) calls 'hierarchical gold standard relativism', or at the same level, that is the same academic standard, but different ('parallel relativism') are difficult questions to answer. Our concern here is to try to explore the context of the proposal that there are different academic standards, the reasons for this and the implications for British higher education and the continuation of the external examiner system.

In order to do this, we will briefly look at the origins of the external examiner system and the development of higher education in relation to the purposes and operation of the external examiner system. This involves a glance at the 'elite' higher education system, the establishment and development of the binary system, through to today's 'mass' system. The discussion then draws on the evidence collected by a study carried out in 1994, concerned with the future of the external examiner system (Silver, Stennett and Williams, 1995). It considers in particular what higher education institutions and others perceive about the effectiveness of the system in

relation to the comparability of academic standards and the notion of a national academic standard. We end by discussing ways forward if the external examiner system is to continue operating.

The origins

The external examiner system in British higher education has existed since the early nineteenth century, used by the new universities of Durham and London as a means of providing additional markers and of ensuring common high academic standards. In 1880 the new Victoria University (later to become Leeds, Liverpool and Manchester universities) was to establish the involvement of external examiners as a matter of principle, out of a concern for the public's perception of its academic standards previously guaranteed for them as colleges teaching for degrees of the University of London (Silver, 1994). This practice spread as the higher education sector expanded and it became an accepted form of unregulated practice by new entrants to the university system. The practice was adopted by the National Council for Technological Awards (NCTA) in the 1950s and continued by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) from the mid-1960s as a formal requirement. The external examiner had become a symbol of accepted academic standards across higher education.

From its start CNAA produced regulations concerning external examiners. In 1974, for example, it stated that the function of external examiners was to have a watching brief on comparability of academic standards across institutions of higher education and to ensure that a student was fairly examined and received a just reward (CNAA, 1974).

However, the universities sector operated the system without formal regulation until the 1980s when the political and economic climate brought into question the issue of academic standards and as a consequence attempts were made to codify university practice. This task was undertaken by the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) from the mid-1980s, developing a code of practice on academic standards which described the purposes of the system as ensuring that degrees awarded in similar subjects were comparable in standard in different universities in the United Kingdom, though their content would vary, and that the assessment system was fair and fairly operated in the classification of students (CVCP, 1986).

The purpose of the external examiner system has continued to be seen as having the overall purpose of setting, maintaining and comparing academic standards, even though the nature and size of higher education has changed radically. As a consequence of these changes to higher education, questions are now being raised about the effectiveness of the external examiner system and in particular the traditional means of carrying notions of comparable academic standards across the sector.

The external examiner system and an elite system of higher education

External examiners were able to make or influence decisions about, and to compare, academic standards across institutions because higher education was small enough to do so. Moreover, higher education was governed by the concept of the gold standard as enshrined by those awards developed by the ancient universities of England and Scotland, and the

University of London. It was an elite education in the sense that it was based on the limited numbers of students able to gain access to it, and the implications of those limits such as high selectivity and low student-staff ratios. In the pattern of universities that emerged in the nineteenth century and grew only slowly in the first half of the twentieth century, it was possible to state that an upper second awarded in history, for example, at University A was the same (or not) as an upper second in history at University B.

Trow (1987) has described elite higher education as 'a form of higher education marked by high selectivity and student-staff ratios which allow close student-teacher relations centring around studies at high levels of intensity and complexity, leading to degrees of high and recognised standard'. In the United Kingdom the external examiner system (alongside minimum entry requirements and other features) was a means of offering a guarantee of degree standards to the higher education system and to the wider public, and was therefore integral to the operation of such an elite higher education system. Similar patterns of curriculum content and student progression in similar subjects, and the common use of the end of year examination as the main form of assessment are additional elements of the basis of the traditional framework of British higher education. These 'gold standard' patterns were similar enough, and associated with firmly enough established and accepted criteria and purposes, to make it possible for the external examiner to identify what academic standards seemed to be and to feel confident of ensuring that they were comparable across higher education. The criteria were implicit, and the operation and its outcomes were rarely questioned.

The expansion of higher education in the 1960s and 1970s, with university status given to the Colleges of Advanced Technology (CATs) and the creation of the polytechnics and colleges sector of higher education, marked the move towards the mass higher education system of the 1990s. However, during that movement, the established processes of higher education continued to be preserved. (In his recent study of mass higher education, Scott (1995) has observed that 'many of the detailed practices in British universities remain rooted in an elite past' and he categorises these practices as 'selective entry, specialised academic disciplines, low wastage and high standards' - practices which ensure an elite mentality in a mass system.) In one sense it might be argued that an elite system continued through the universities sector while the 'mass' nature of higher education took shape through the polytechnics and the colleges sector. The position is more complicated, however, since, as Neave (1985) underlined, the 'move toward mass higher education extended elite criteria to the non elite sector of polytechnics and colleges of education'. How, therefore, in the new situation were academic standards affected and what was the impact on the traditional roles of the external examiner?

The external examiner and the binary line

Neave's notion that elite criteria were extended to the former polytechnics and colleges sector deserves further exploration. In 1963 the Robbins' Committee, responding to increased demand for higher education, recommended further expansion which was accepted by the government. The CATs were made universities, the Open University was created, and the polytechnics and colleges sector was established (though Robbins did not recommend a separate sector, but an

expansion of the existing universities sector). The latter was to be validated by the CNAA to provide a new and different type of higher education albeit with equality of esteem and academic standards comparable to those of the universities.

There was little coherence in the development of the new sector, but it was characterised by what Pratt and Burgess (1974) described as academic drift - an aspiration to become like the universities in terms of level and mode of provision, student intake and academic course content. The external examiner system was instrumental in helping the new sector achieve this goal. By 1968-69 the overwhelming majority of external examiners appointed by CNAA to the colleges (prior to becoming polytechnics) were from the universities sector. This gave a clear signal that the non-universities sector wanted to show publicly that it was aiming at high academic standards and that its associated institutions were to be comparable with the universities sector - a similar situation to that of the Victoria University a century before. Trow (ibid) argued that whilst the new sector helped expand higher education, it was expansion in terms of a 'common system of elite education'.

The external examiner and mass higher education

Trow also argued that there was a price to be paid to maintain the first degree on an academic gold standard defined by high common academic standards. The price paid was the establishment of limits to a diversity of curriculum and function, as well as limits to the size and diversity of the student body. The provision of mass higher education, he argued, was 'incompatible with the defence of elite standards for the *whole* of higher education, and of course, with the national standard for the first degree'. But, he continued, the

development of modern society creates pressures on higher education to expand and he identified two routes through which this might be accomplished. Firstly, if high academic standards were to survive, mass higher education could only be sustained through a separate set of institutions with 'lower per capita costs and lower standards'. The second route was to abolish the binary line and create a larger system which he believed would eventually contain a mass of institutions 'differentiated in character, function, and in cost and standard ... (resulting in) the emergence of a reluctant and resentful sector of mass higher education'. A genuine mass higher education would, in these terms, mean profound changes to basic assumptions about the operation of all or part of the system of higher education.

The 1987 White Paper looked at possibilities of increased participation in higher education, and the 1991 White Paper gave the polytechnics degree awarding powers and permission to call themselves universities, thus abolishing the binary line - following Trow's second route towards a mass higher education system. In 1987 the government realised the potential for recruiting more mature entrants without the traditional A level entry qualifications, and saw no evidence that this would mean a lowering of academic standards. The pressure was towards the production of highly qualified manpower, a closer match between higher education and the economic requirements of the country, and the admission of students with vocational and non-traditional qualifications. None of this, however, meant any fundamental shift in the assumptions underlying the character and processes of higher education. Only slowly in the 1990s was there a realisation, for reasons to do with scale and the structural responses of institutions to new external and internal realities, that these assumptions were coming under considerable strain.

From the late 1980s higher education has been characterised by features which have had far-reaching implications for both academic standards and the operation of the external examiner system. The expansion in student numbers has brought students from non-traditional and under-represented groups into an increasingly diverse student body. With the end of the binary line and pressures from government and the funding bodies for institutions to respond to the market place, the sector has become even more diverse in terms of institutional missions and ethos. New subjects of study and combinations of subjects have emerged, and institutions have made a variety of crucially important organisational changes. New curricular structures, principally through modularisation, have been introduced to provide wider student choice and to promote more efficient use of resources. Semesterisation of the academic year has in many cases accompanied these developments. New methods and strategies for teaching, learning and assessment have been developed, and the uses of new technologies point towards a range of other changes.

Such developments, alongside increasing pressure on resources, have raised acute questions about the effectiveness of the external examiner system, and in particular the external examiner's role in contributing to comparability of academic standards. Not all the changes, of course, have affected institutions similarly. Some were introducing many of these changes from the early 1970s, others did so as a result of the expansion of student numbers in the late 1980s. Some have implemented radical changes, others have absorbed them within relatively unchanged structures and procedures, and others have continued their established practices unchanged. Student constituencies have not changed uniformly across the system, and questions of academic standards have presented

themselves differently in institutions' different circumstances. The effectiveness of external examining has become bound up with the increasing complexities of higher education. If the central role of the external examiner has been to help maintain comparable academic standards, and if there are perceived differences of, or concerns about, academic standards across the system, then demonstrably the external examiner system is not working. It was as a result of these changes and concerns that a study of the external examiner system was carried out in 1994.

The study

Doubts about the effectiveness of the external examiner system have occasionally been expressed in recent decades. In 1983, for example, Williams and Blackstone questioned its effectiveness as a means of 'equalising' academic standards. They argued that if all external examiners applied the same criteria as they did in their own institutions, academic standards would be uniform, but in fact the tasks performed by external examiners varied from institution to institution. Furthermore, the A level grades required of students by institutions also varied, but the proportions of degree classifications were relatively similar. They hypothesised that either 'universities whose entrants have high A level grades do a poor job of turning these into good degrees or that, despite external examining, the standard of academic attainment implied by a particular classification is not the same in all institutions'. Here, the authors were assuming that A levels are good predictors of degree success, whereas a number of studies have discredited this theory (see Entwistle and Wilson, 1977, and Bourner and Hamed, 1987). However, they believed that a comprehensive study of the external examiner

system was needed in order to establish how practice differed and how effective the system was in 'ensuring reasonable uniformity of standards'.

A number of studies in the late 1980s and early 1990s (notably Warren Piper's 1988 study of *The Role of External Examiners*) highlighted concerns about the system as a result of changes in higher education, but the rapidity of further change led to the study carried out by the Quality Support Centre of the Open University on behalf of the Higher Education Quality Council in 1994. Its terms of reference were to collect information and perspectives from higher education institutions and other interested bodies, and to examine the impact of developments, especially in the context of academic standards. The study took the form of a consultation exercise with all higher education institutions and visits to 20 of those institutions, a similar number of professional bodies and others with an interest in external examining.

The study addressed the issue of academic standards by asking whether it was possible in the present system to ensure that external examiners are able to make valid comparisons of academic standards within subjects and/or across institutions and what obstacles might exist. (This question aimed to tease out whether comparability was only possible across higher education at the subject level or whether it was possible regardless of subject.) Whilst there has been near unanimous support for retaining the external examiner system, the majority of respondents believe that the external examiner system *should in principle* enable comparisons of academic standards to be made, but only at the subject level because of the variation in subject conventions and traditions. However, for a number of reasons and with varying degrees of emphasis,

respondents believe that it was not possible, or would become increasingly impossible, to make valid judgements and comparisons. The great majority of respondents believe that the system will become unworkable unless it is strengthened and/or modified. The reasons given reflect the impact of the inter-related changes on the operation of external examining that we have mentioned above and more fully describe below.

Students: numbers and diversity. The weight of student numbers has raised questions as to whether external examiners have sufficient time to do the job properly given the increased workload and time-tabling constraints resulting from new curricular structures and the organisation of the academic year. The diminishing sample of student work seen by external examiners raises fundamental questions about the nature of their role, by comparison with the one they played when numbers of students were small. The clustering of assessment periods across the sector compounds this issue together with the workload pressures in their own institution on academic staff who act as external examiners elsewhere. Expansion has meant that external examiners are faced with diverse programmes of study and a more diverse student body. On modular programmes students may come from a spectrum of pathways, with different backgrounds and requirements. On similar programmes in different institutions, student cohorts will vary in terms of their entry qualifications or lack of them. In such circumstances issues will arise concerning the comparability of academic standards. A new feature for the external examiner is therefore the question of what account to take of factors other than the output profile, such as course design, student support, methods of teaching, learning and assessment, student specialisms - the diverse elements of 'value added'.

Institutions: scale and diversity. The number of higher education institutions has grown at various points since the early nineteenth century, and even within an elite system their curricula, their emphases, their cultures and styles, have shown differences, and markedly so in the recent past. It has therefore been increasingly difficult for any one external examiner to have an overview (if ever it was) of academic standards in a particular subject discipline except, perhaps, where a professional body and its accreditation process are involved. This has been compounded since the mid-1980s by the code of practice which requires external examiners to hold no more than two substantial external examiner appointments at the undergraduate level at any one time. The diversity of institutional missions and ethos, respondents to the study have widely argued, make it impossible to compare one institution against another, except where like can be compared with like. This now poses a threat to the external examiner system by potentially encouraging groups of institutions to exchange external examiners mostly within their own group boundaries. If this is occurring and if it were to become a trend it would further undermine the notion of academic standards, and the external examiner system, as national.

Subject range and new subjects. Problems lie with those subjects whose range is wide, such as business and management studies, and with combinations of subjects which make it impossible for individual external examiners to make judgements across a range that may be outside their expertise. Respondents have in some cases pointed to new or greatly modified subjects of study which by definition can mean a lack of appropriately qualified external examiners. Also, academic staff in small and specialised areas of study might be less willing to become external examiners, all of which must raise

issues concerning academic standards in the absence of national guidelines or definitions.

Curricular structures. Although models of modularisation have varied considerably, the process has been frequently cited as one of the major issues affecting the traditional functions of external examiners. The issues relating to modularisation are not necessarily new, but they are heightened and made more transparent by the changes they involve - connected with scale, innovation, pressures of time, and the diversity of units, programmes, assessment and students. Concerns to surface are listed below; it is not intended to be an exclusive list, but the intention is to demonstrate the implications for academic standards and their comparability. Difficulties indicated by external examiners therefore include: the relationship to tiered examination and assessment boards and the different roles ascribed to each tier; the difficulty or impossibility of obtaining an overall picture of students taking a range of modules; the highly specific nature, as well as the diversity, of modules and the range often required of an individual external examiner; the move away from the traditional end-of-year examination to new forms of assessment (including multi-media assignments, peer, group and self assessment ...) which may vary from subject to subject and even within the same subject; complex and rapidly changing regulations and procedures; uncertainty about the most appropriate ways to involve external examiners; and additional demands on their time. Semesterisation has increased the difficulties, by introducing variations in the holding of examination and assessment boards and the involvement of external examiners at the ends of semesters, and compressing the time available for assessment.

New methods and strategies for teaching, learning and assessment. The issue of the relationship between internal and external assessment has been pointed up as of particular importance. New and varied methods of assessment, including those based on competences and a variety of learning outcomes, have raised questions about the appropriateness and expertise of external examiners in making judgements based on an imperfect understanding of the purposes and procedures at work. Given these variations there is a fundamental question regarding the ability of external examiners to make such judgements and comparisons, particularly when they cannot access the relevant student assignments and assessments. In some of these cases external examiners expecting to participate in a traditional sense at the final examination stage, may be able to reach judgements, but only by presence through the year at competence-based, performance-based, group-based, workplace-based or other locus of assessment. Once again the issue of overload arises.

All these factors have been heavily underlined as concerns in the study, though there are also others. Firstly, the low level of *remuneration* for external examining, although cited as derisory, is not a major issue in itself, except when it is combined with the pressures of time and other academic and administrative requirements, and hence fewer people are willing to act as external examiners. Secondly, other *external quality assurance arrangements* require support from the academic community because they rely on the use of peer review to legitimise decisions: potential and actual external examiners are also the people approached to take part in external quality assurance arrangements such as quality audit for the Higher Education Quality Council, quality assessment for the Funding Councils and accreditation for professional

bodies. Thirdly, given the changes and diversities highlighted above, matching external examiners to programmes of study may subordinate the traditional *appointment criteria* of seniority and status to ones associated with less experienced academics who are more familiar with new forms of assessment or curricular structures. Fourthly, within particular institutional contexts the proper *briefing* of external examiners to enable them to cope with their tasks may again raise time as an inhibiting factor.

Conclusions

Because diversity and expansion in the new conditions of mass higher education have had such an impact, the evidence suggests that there is little acceptance of the possibility of 'national' academic standards. The exception lies somewhat uncertainly within subjects within which there is an attempt to uphold traditions and conventions in increasingly complex conditions, and where in some cases professional body accreditation lays down a degree of conformity to required curricula and outcomes. The only means of achieving a single national academic standard is one which was mainly mentioned to the study only to be dismissed, that is, through some form of national (core) curriculum across subject disciplines and agreed with institutions, subject associations, professional bodies and employers where appropriate, set at a national level and monitored by the external examiner system and/or some other form of external quality assurance arrangement. This implies that the attributes of the first degree and those expected of graduates on completion would need to be identified, and though there is continuing debate around these issues, there is little prospect of sufficient agreement to make them a basis for policy. Debates about

threshold academic standards and about the future of honours classification are directly relevant to the continued operation of the external examiner system, and evidence to the study was clear that decisions to retain, modify or abandon honours classification would not undermine the commitment to an external examiner system.

Whether a more attainable goal might be to establish minimum acceptable threshold academic standards by subject discipline is open to question, and implies, as do many other of the issues and solutions under discussion here, a reappraisal of the external examiner's role. If there were to be a role for external examiners in adopting, maintaining and enhancing a threshold or any 'national' academic standard within or across subjects there would be implications for the selection, training and monitoring of the external examiners themselves. A crucial question is whether the notion of threshold academic standards is compatible with institutional diversity and autonomy, and whether its implementation would be feasible, given the diversities we have discussed, by internal and external examiners alike. An alternative dilemma is whether the operation of external examining on the basis of *broad* (which in this connection may mean vague and indefinable) understanding and comparability will remain a valuable and viable activity. In both cases, and for other reasons, the issue of sustaining a supply of sufficient, appropriate, qualified and willing external examiners, able to operate across the internal boundaries of a national system of higher education, is and will remain an important one.

Since the evidence to this study suggests that there is near-unanimous support in British higher education for retaining an external examiner system, and since external examining is directly related to issues of academic standards, the

implications of the intricacies of recent developments need to be fundamentally examined and debated. There are perhaps two main directions in which the system may look for solutions.

The first is to accept that it is still possible to define national academic standards at the subject level (although this a simplistic notion given the multi- and inter-disciplinary nature of today's curricula). These academic standards would be defined through identified subject criteria, but set within a national framework to ensure comparability of threshold academic standards across the subject. Such a framework would need to take account of the diversity of institutional missions and ethos (and hence diversity within subjects), and promote and encourage the achievement of academic standards above the threshold. It would also need to provide agreed criteria for student assessment, awards and degree classification (if that is to remain) and the attributes of graduates.

The second direction is to accept that no overall national academic standard is definable at the level of subject (or across subjects). Academic standards, awards and graduates will be *different*. However, external examiners would remain an important feature of British higher education because they would ensure against academic standards becoming totally unacceptable, working within institutions' declared aims, regulations and procedures. They would therefore act as an external reference point and as an imprimatur for an institution's awards. They would do so either by functioning fully or partly along traditional lines where this is possible and desirable, or by redefining their roles to encompass the sampling of examination and assessment boards, but also enough of programme and institutional procedures to be able

to endorse or validate the processes which lead to outcomes within the institution's frameworks. External examiners would operate at the intersection of national academic policies, the academic standards of their subject area, albeit loosely defined, and the academic standards as defined by the receiving institution and the programme of study. That intersection would be negotiated between the external examiner and the internal examiners (Silver, Stennett and Williams, 1995). That negotiation could be monitored by rigorous institutional quality assurance procedures and confirmed by whatever external quality assurance arrangements are operating.

Whether either of these scenarios is feasible in this form is open to debate, and it will be clear that the second is our preferred option. The higher education system needs to come clean about the nature of the differences in 'academic standards', a label often used without a great deal of understanding of the diverse realities to which it is applied. To retreat from the crude and subtle diversities in higher education towards a mythical version of an older monolith is no longer an option. Whatever direction higher education chooses in order to clarify what it means, conceptually and operationally, by academic standards, and to reshape the external examiner system in relation to them, a fundamental cultural shift by the academic community will be required.

What was also made clear by the 1994 study, if further clarity on this score were in fact needed, is that commitment to retaining an external examiner system most often means that it has to be strengthened to be effective. On some aspects of this as on other aspects of these scenarios there may not yet be a consensus, but some of its elements have been particularly strongly expressed. It will need to be far better

supported than it has been up to now. This means not just increased resources but also time to allow staff acting as both external and internal examiners to do their jobs properly; some form of national support for enhancing the pool of external examiners through support of adequate training or briefing at local or regional level for new and potential external examiners; opportunities to discuss issues affecting student assessment and internal and external examining; and the exchange of best practice for subject disciplines and across subjects.

If the general wish for the system of external examining to be retained is to have meaning, it needs to be redefined in relation to the operation of academic standards particularly at the levels of subjects and institutions. It also needs to be valued, partly through some of the support mechanisms suggested, but perhaps most crucially through the recognition it is granted amongst the professional roles of academic staff. A continued, serious role for the function requires that it be accepted not only by the receiving institution, but also by the home institution and by public policy as an important contribution to higher education, alongside the teaching, research, and service roles performed by members of the academic community.

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III STANDARDS AND EMPLOYMENT

Malcolm Frazer

Introduction

In this paper, the word "standards" is used to refer to standards of occupational competence. These have been developed over the last decade as a consequence of the establishment of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications. There are well defined rules and procedures for developing and specifying them. Consequently, the term "occupational standards" has a precise meaning, in contrast to the use of "standards" in other contexts with varied and often rather vague meanings.

The focus here will be on occupational standards at levels of employment which might be labelled "graduate" or "professional", although it is important not to confuse them with standards for vocational courses provided by academe (eg B Eng., HND) on the one hand, and the requirements (standards) of professional, statutory or regulatory bodies for admission to a professional register, on the other. The interrelationships and distinctions between graduate standards, professional recognition requirements and occupational standards are explored later.

Historical development and overview

In 1986, an enquiry initiated by the government produced a report (MSC[1], 1986) making recommendations about the future of vocational qualifications. The most important outcome was the establishment of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) with a brief to develop a system of national vocational qualifications (nvqs). Subsequently, a similar remit was given to the Scottish Vocational Education Council (SCOTVEC), and vocational qualifications for Scotland (svqs)[2] were produced. Vocational qualifications (vqs) were to be based on standards of occupational competence which would be defined by groups led by employers.

The idea was to regulate the numerous awarding bodies in vocational areas in order to improve training and enhance the skills and capabilities of the workforce. It was hoped that the complex "jungle" of awarding bodies with their different practices and terminologies would be simplified. The goal was to create a credible and easily understood structure of qualifications which would meet the needs of employers. However, it must be admitted that there is still considerable confusion, and in some quarters even resistance, amongst employers, employees and providers of education and training. NCVQ, guided by the MSC, developed the "NVQ framework", which is a matrix of eleven areas of occupational competence and five levels shown in Table 1. The current definitions of the levels are in Table 2. This article is

[1] The names of the various government departments and agencies (eg Manpower Services Commission, MSC; Training Agency, TA; Employment Department, ED) operational at the time of reference will be used. At the time of writing (Autumn, 1995) the Department for Education and Employment, DfEE, is the lead department, although departments and offices in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales also have responsibilities.

[2] In this article vqs will be used to refer jointly to nvqs and svqs.

Table 1 The NVQ Framework of five levels and eleven areas of competence

Area of Competence	*Level 1*	*Level 2*	*Level 3*	*Level 4*	*Level 5*
Tending animals and plants					
Extracting and providing natural resources					
Constructing					
Engineering					
Manufacturing					
Transporting					
Providing goods and services					
Providing health, social care and protective services					
Providing business services					
Communicating					
Developing and extending knowledge and skill					

Table 2 Definitions of the five levels

Level 1	Competence which involves the application of knowledge in the performance of a range of varied work activities, most of which may be routine or predictable.
Level 2	Competence which involves the application of knowledge in a significant range of varied work activities, performed in a variety of contexts. Some of the activities are complex or non- routine and there is some individual responsibility and autonomy. Collaboration with others, perhaps through membership of a work group or team, may be a requirement.
Level 3	Competence which involves the application of knowledge in a broad range of varied work activities in a wide variety of contexts, most of which are complex and non-routine. There is considerable responsibility and autonomy and control or guidance of others is often required.
Level 4	Competence which involves the application of knowledge in a broad range of complex technical or professional work activities performed in a wide variety of contexts and with a substantial degree of personal responsibility and autonomy. Responsibility for the work of others and the allocation of resources is often present.
Level 5	Competence which involves the application of a significant range of fundamental principles across a wide and often unpredictable variety of contexts. Very substantial personal autonomy and often significant responsibility for the work of others and for the allocation of substantial resources feature strongly, as do personal accountabilities for analysis and diagnosis, design, planning, execution and evaluation.

concerned with levels 4 and 5. NCVQ states that these definitions are intended as a general guide and are not prescriptive.

Government and NCVQ have made it absolutely clear that level 5 will be the highest level, and assert that all occupations can be located within the framework (Table 1).

NCVQ and MSC also created a system for developing occupational standards and related vqs involving a number of different bodies. These are described below and summarised in Table 3. The Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) has produced a general description of this system aimed at a higher education audience (HEQC, 1995); but the definitive descriptions and requirements will be found in the publications of NCVQ and SCOTVEC, which update their criteria and guidance at regular intervals (NCVQ, 1995a; SCOTVEC, 1995). A series of papers reviewing the current thinking about the implications of the vq approach to learning and the curriculum has recently been published (Burke, 1995).

At regular intervals NCVQ publishes The *NVQ Monitor* which, in addition to articles and news items, lists all the currently accredited nvqs and the awarding bodies it has approved. There is also a National Database of Vocational Qualifications. Currently, there are over 800 accredited nvqs of which about 100 are at level 4 and less than five are at level 5; and there are about 140 awarding bodies. By far the most popular area, at all levels, is providing business services. Well over 30 per cent of all vq certificates awarded have been in this area.

Table 3 The bodies responsible for developing standards, awarding vqs and assuring their quality

Body	Function	Comment
Government	1. Define policy and strategy 2. Establish lead bodies	1. Government established NCVQ, and gave SCOTVEC a similar brief 2. Currently, DfEE (formerly MSC, TA, ED) with government offices in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales is responsible
Lead bodies	Develop, own, and keep up to date occupational standards	1. Lead bodies are employer lead 2. Development method is described in the text 3. There are about 180 lead bodies: some are grouped under Occupational Standards Councils 4. Government provides funding for the establishment of lead bodies
Accrediting bodies, ie NCVQ and SCOTVEC	1. Approve awarding bodies for specific vqs (ie accredit vqs) 2. Assure quality Scotvec is also an awarding body	SCOTVEC is also an awarding body
Awarding bodies (eg for levels 4 and 5 BTEC[3], Open University, MVC[4])	1. Develop vqs based on the standards, and submit for accreditation 2. Approve assessment centres 3. Award vqs 4. Control quality using external verifiers 5. Appoint and train external verifiers	1. A particular vq may be awarded by more than one awarding body 2. Awarding bodies may also provide training 3. These bodies award vqs to candidates who on assessment demonstrate they have reached the standards of occupational competence
Assessment Centres	1. Assess candidates 2. Appoint assessors and internal verifiers.	

[3]Business and Technology Council.
[4]Management Verification Consortium, based on a group of Business Schools.

It was deliberate government policy that occupational standards and vocational qualifications should be developed by starting with the lower levels and working upwards towards levels 4 and 5. Progress has been slow. In 1995, the government produced a consultative paper about extending the vq framework to higher levels (ED, 1995a). This was accompanied by an excellent set of background papers (ED, 1995b).

It must be emphasised that a vq is awarded when an assessment centre is satisfied that the candidate has demonstrated all the competences contained in the relevant occupational standards. Normally this demonstration is made by the candidate at work, although some simulation of the workplace is permitted. Assessors observe performance, question the candidate and examine submitted portfolios of evidence. The assessment can be on a unit basis so that credit can be accumulated towards the full vq award. Vqs are therefore completely "outcomes based". There are no courses which have to be completed, and no time serving. There is open access: candidates submit for assessment when they feel they have reached the required occupational standards of competence.

In May 1991, the government published no less than four white papers on education and training, one of them (HMG 1991) proposed a system of General National Vocational Qualifications[5] (gnvqs). Unlike nvqs, these are not work based, and courses of study are provided which are intended to develop the knowledge and skills required in broad occupational areas (see NCVQ, 1995b for details). Gnvqs

[5]There would also be corresponding General Scottish Vocational Qualifications, gsvqs. For convenience, gvqs will be used for both.

have been introduced at foundation, intermediate and advanced levels. Take up has been strong, and the gnvq advanced level is seen as an appropriate qualification for entry to higher education. Although there are national standards for gnvqs, which are specified in terms of expected learning outcomes, they are not considered further here for two reasons. First, they are not based on specific employment standards, and secondly the existing gnvqs are at the lower levels. At the time of writing, the outcome of the consultation (NCVQ, 1995c) on introducing gnvqs at higher (ie 4 and 5) levels is not known.

In summary, during the last eight years the UK has developed, by government initiative and largely by government funding, a framework of vocational qualifications which:

- is based on occupational standards developed by employer lead bodies
- is concerned with demonstrating competence in the work place
- involves a system of assessment centres and awarding bodies
- has quality assurance from two accrediting bodies, NCVQ and SCOTVEC.

The development and presentation of occupational standards

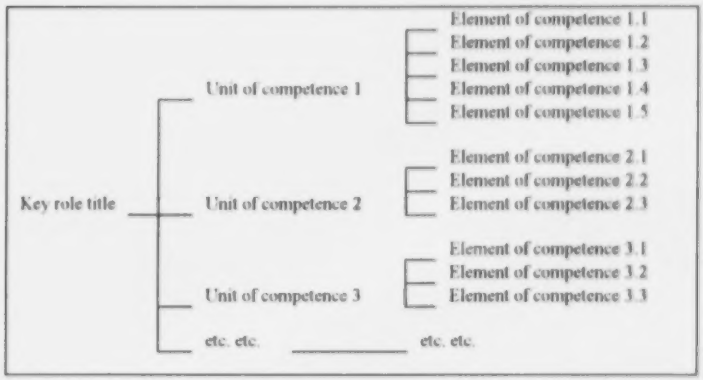
The Employment Department (or at various times its agencies) have produced, and funded, a method for

developing and presenting occupational standards. The first step is usually to produce a "map" of the occupational area to be covered. This identifies the boundaries, features and structure of the area and indicates the principal organisations which should become involved. A lead body is appointed, which consists mainly of employers (in practice, representatives of employer organisations) for the occupational area. For work on the higher levels, representatives of professional bodies and other experts are included. The lead body is responsible for producing a functional analysis of the area. There is now considerable expertise in functional analysis, mainly from independent consultants, who are employed by the lead bodies to undertake the detailed work.

Functional analysis is a tool to identify the competences required by someone working in an occupational area at a particular level. It involves mail, interview and workshop questioning of employers and employed in the area about their functions and purposes. It is an iterative technique, continuing until there is agreement about what competences a person needs, including evidence and criteria of performance and possession of knowledge, in order to do the job. Functional analysis starts by asking the question: "What is the overall function of this occupation?". This is called the key purpose. The next question is: "What is needed for the key purpose to be achieved?" There may be several answers and these become the key roles. The same question is asked again of each key role; such questioning continues until eventually the answers produce units of competence. For each unit, again the question of what is needed for achievement is posed. The answers produce elements of competence.

The units and elements of competence make up the basic structure of the occupational standards for a particular occupational area and level. This is shown in simplified form in Table 4.

Table 4 An overall, simplified structure of an occupational standard



As an illustration, part of the occupational standards for the level 4 nvq in management are reproduced in the appendix. These standards (currently under revision) were developed by the Management Charter Initiative. Four key roles are identified, one of which is "Managing people"; this is broken down into four units, one of which is Unit I 4: "Contribute to the Recruitment and Selection of Personnel". One of the elements of competence for this Unit is Element 4.2: "Contribute to the assessment and selection of candidates against team and organisational requirements". Elements of competence describe performance requirements necessary to carry out the occupation. However, it is important to appreciate that each element of competence is much more than a sentence with an active verb. Functional analysis

produces for each element of competence a number of qualifiers and descriptors. These are: (1) the range statement, which defines the contexts, limits and conditions for demonstrating the competence; (2) performance criteria and evidence, which enable the assessor to recognise competent performance; (3) specification of the knowledge and understanding which supports this performance. An example of one element of competence is provided in the appendix. It will be realised that the full statement of occupational standards for a particular occupation and level, consisting of several units, each with several elements takes up many pages.

A vq is based on the standards and consists of mandatory and sometimes optional units. At first sight, and possibly at later sights as well, the full description of a vq must seem quite daunting to employers, candidates and assessors alike. The justification is that competence at work is complex and that the accrediting bodies are required to produce national, fair, comparable, valid and reliable systems of assessment for their qualifications. Jessup, 1991, provides a justification for functional analysis and the method of presenting standards. Precise criteria and guidance for presenting vqs is published regularly (NCVQ, 1995a and SCOTVEC, 1995).

Functional analysis, leading to the presentation of standards in the way described here, is not without its critics (see below), particularly for higher level occupations. This section has described the dominant method of developing and presenting occupational standards in the UK today. There has been, and continues to be, a very considerable investment from central government in this approach. Despite this, many remain sceptical, disinterested or confused, and call for a reappraisal, reform and simplification.

Comparison of occupational (vqs) with academic qualifications

Here is a further point of confusion, for which the government must take some blame. Despite the obvious differences between academic and vocational qualifications, which are summarised in Table 5, there continue to be publications which have diagrams showing parallel (usually vertical) streams of academic and vocational qualifications with horizontal lines ("bridges") implying equivalencies. Worse are explicit statements such as: "An nvq level 3 is equivalent to GCE A Level"; and "A Master's degree is at least worth a vq level 4". Academic and occupational qualifications are different and should not be compared in this way.

There are probably two reasons why equivalencies between academic and occupational qualifications are proposed. The first, which is highly laudable, is to ensure that learning, if it is relevant, can be transferred between the workplace and the classroom and vice versa. This is discussed later. The second is to promote occupational qualifications by giving them status. This is misguided, because attempts to place vqs in an academic framework will always lead to the judgement that they are inferior. In reality, they are neither inferior nor superior: they are different. The differences between academic and occupational qualifications should be emphasised, not glossed over. Only in this way will vqs have a standing in their own right. "Parity of esteem", which is sometimes used instead of "equivalent", has to be earned; it cannot come by government decree. The importance of distinguishing between occupational and academic qualifications has been well put by Debling, 1995, who stresses that they serve different purposes; and that it is quite

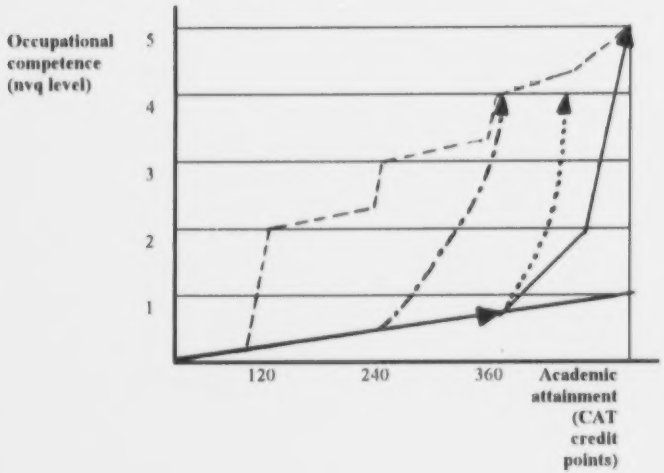
misleading to describe one as better or more appropriate than another.

Table 5 Differences between vqs and academic qualifications

Feature	Occupational (vqs)	Academic
What is the focus?	An occupation	One or more subjects
Are there entry requirements?	No	Usually specified in terms of lower academic qualifications
What has to be learnt?	Highly specific skills (occupational standards) defined by employers	Less specific syllabus, defined mainly by academics
Where does learning take place?	Mainly in the workplace	Mainly in an academic institution
How long does learning take?	As long as it takes to become competent: no fixed length course	Usually a fixed length course has to be followed
What is assessed?	Performance outcomes	Process and outcomes
Where does assessment take place?	Workplace (exceptionally elsewhere)	Academic institution (exceptionally elsewhere)
What type of assessment method is used?	Criterion referenced to national occupational standards	Usually norm referenced
How are the results of assessment specified?	Candidate is either found to be competent, or "not yet competent"	Usually grades awarded
Is the assessment based on units?	Always	Sometimes

Swindlehurst, 1994, stresses the difference by a diagram, which places occupational and academic qualifications not parallel, but orthogonal (Fig. 1). On one axis is educational attainment (a suitable scale might be academic credit points, with 360 points equating to an honours degree), and on the other axis is occupational competence (measured by award of vqs at various levels). An individual may, and should, strive to advance as far as possible in both directions, but there will be many pathways for so doing.

Fig. 1 **Occupational competence and academic attainment are orthogonal (Swindlehurst, 1994)**



Reference to credit points is another source of confusion. There are now well established credit accumulation and transfer schemes in further and higher education. The central principle is that learning wherever, however and whenever it takes (or took) place might be awarded credit towards an academic qualification. The key word is might: it depends on whether the learning is appropriate for the particular qualification. The vq system is also a credit accumulation and transfer system. Vqs are based on units, which can be gained at any time, thereby giving credit towards the full vq. The existence of two credit schemes has lead some to believe that there can be wholesale transfer between them. For example, in one institution, an nvq level 4 in management is awarded 60 M credit points towards an MBA. This is ill-advised.

However, it is very desirable that credit for learning in one system, if relevant to the qualification in the other, can be transferred. Assessed competence in the workplace could well be relevant, and therefore given credit, for a degree; and conversely, some of the knowledge evidence specified in an occupational standard could be provided by transfer of academic credit.

The metaphor of apples and pears is useful. Although they are both fruit, apples cannot be counted as pears, because they are different. Likewise occupational competence and academic attainment are both related to qualifications, but they cannot be counted together because they are different. However, we can take a pear and compare some of its characteristics (eg citric acid, dietary fibre content, etc.) with the corresponding characteristics of an apple. We can only usefully exchange academic and vocational credit if the measures are common.

One final cause of confusion is terminological arising from the introduction of gvqs. A casual observer would assume that vqs and gvqs have much in common; but, with the exception that they are accredited by the same bodies, they are very different. Answering the questions in column 1 of Table 5, would place gvqs close to the academic column. This leads to the notion that in the UK, at the higher levels, there are four distinct types of qualification: academic, vocational, professional and occupational (Table 6).

Interrelationships of qualifications at higher levels

An attempt to summarise the positions is provided in Table 6. This does not represent any official view, but is not inconsistent with the various consultation papers (ED, 1995a;

NCVQ, 1995c). The former was explicit that higher level vqs and degrees would coexist, and was implicit that there would also be coexistence with professional body qualifications. There would be no imposition, either on universities, or on professional, regulatory and statutory bodies. A possible model for the future is provided by the consultative paper from The Engineering Council, 1995. In common with most professional bodies admission to the register of members has three requirements: an academic qualification, evidence of competence at work (which could be provided by the appropriate vq) and ongoing commitment to the profession.

Table 6 Four distinct types of qualification at higher levels

Generic name* for qualification	Examples	Relation to employment	Comment on standards
Academic	BA(Hons)	No direct relation	Not specific Determined by each university, and therefore not national
Occupational	nvq level 4 Banking	For a specific occupation	Highly specific occupational standards National
Professional	CEng	Sometimes a statutory requirement	Specific requirements to be admitted to the professional body register of members
Vocational	1. HND 2. BSc Nursing 3. Gnvq 4**	Refers to a "broad vocational area"	Not as specific as for vqs Often mainly outcomes based Sometimes national

* In alphabetical, not status, order. They are different and cannot be compared.
** If introduced, see NCVQ, 1995 c.

As indicated earlier, with the exception of management, there are not many vqs at levels 4 and 5. What is preventing their introduction?

Problems with occupational standards at higher levels

Firstly, there are technical issues, such as doubts about the suitability of functional analysis at all levels, but particularly at higher levels. Some criticisms are philosophical (Barnett, 1995 and Hyland, 1994) and some are more practical (Eraut, 1994). There certainly are alternatives to functional analysis. However, government policy to start with the lower levels, the funding available and therefore the momentum generated to deliver this policy has prevented any serious study of alternatives. Some commentators have expressed doubts about the atomistic approach of functional analysis, considering that high level occupations inevitably require a holistic approach. It is alleged that people in high level occupations answer the questions of the functional analysts, but have neither the time, patience nor language to explain that the resulting list of elements of competence does not convey the complexity of their everyday activity at work.

Secondly, there is an urgent need to address the issues of knowledge, understanding and values at the higher levels. For knowledge and understanding, this must be principally a question for the academic community. It is not an easy task to describe all the knowledge used at work without falling into the traps of over-simplification, over-compartmentalisation, inflexibility and blindness to future needs; or simply listing everything back to key stage 1 of the National Curriculum. A judicious mix of nationally recognised subject experts, employers, functional analysis gurus need to be convened to tackle the problem of presenting the knowledge requirements of higher level vqs. These cannot be separated from the issue of values (making ethical judgements in the work or professional context). It seems likely that this is unsuitable for

the vq assessment of performance approach, and it might be better left to the professional bodies. Certainly they, and not the vq accrediting and awarding bodies, have the responsibility, often statutory, for monitoring ethical standards. There are related problems of the validity and reliability of assessment of knowledge, understanding and value judgements in high level occupations.

Thirdly, there are the problems of benefits and costs. For the higher levels, more needs to be done to illustrate that obtaining a vq will lead to tangible benefits to employers and individuals. It is interesting to note that, one clear response from employers to the consultation on the "Vision Paper" (ED, 1995a) was that whereas higher level occupational standards were of value for purposes of recruitment, job specification and identifying staff training and development needs, the related vqs were likely to be of less value. Level 5 vqs are seen to be related to continuing professional development, but would someone at that level have the time or motivation to submit for assessment for a full vq? The opportunity to submit for specific units would be more attractive.

The most encouraging response to the consultation was the wide recognition that improvements are needed in the workplace competence of personnel at all levels, that the occupational standards have an important role in achieving this, and finally that positive working partnerships between employers, professional bodies and further and higher education institutions are essential. There are barriers to creating these partnerships, but the opportunities are becoming clearer to all those involved.

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Appendix

Example of an Element of Competence:

Management Charter Initiative Level 4 in Management

(Reproduced with permission of the Management Verification Consortium.)

Key Role: Manage People

Unit 1.4	Contribute to the Recruitment and Selection of Personnel
Element 4.2	Contribute to the assessment and selection of candidates against team and organisational requirements

Performance criteria

(a) Information obtained from each candidates is judged against specified selection criteria and any additional influencing factors are noted.

(b) Where there is difficulty in interpreting the selection criteria or there appears to be a conflict of criteria, advice is sought with minimum delay from the appropriate people.

(c) Unintended deviations from agreed procedures are identified and corrected before selection decisions are made.

(d) Selection recommendations are communicated only to authorise people.

(e) Records are complete, accurate and clear.

(f) Recommendations for improvements to any aspect of the selection process are communicated promptly to appropriate people.

(g) Recommendations on the candidate to be selected are justifiable from the evidence gained and the process used.

Evidence required

Evidence must cover those aspects of assessment and selection which are within the line responsibility of the manager and include the following items from the range.

Relate to full, part-time, permanent and temporary staff.

Assessment of CVs, letters and references.

Interviewing candidates as a member of an interviewing board.

Verbal and written recommendations and decision on selection.

Take account of all legal requirements, codes of practice, organisational policy and procedures.

Range indicators

The manager contributes to assessment and selection as a member of a team

Assessment and selection are within the line responsibility of the manager for posts which are:

- permanent
- temporary
- full-time
- part-time

Assessment includes:

- use of CVs, letters, references

- interviewing (as member of interview board)
- aptitude and work sample tests

Recommendations and decisions are communicated:

- verbally
- in writing

Legal requirements to be met are:

- Sex discrimination Acts 1975/1986
- Race Relations Act 1976

Influencing factors are:

- first impressions of candidates which may be indicative of assessor bias
- shared interests which may be relevant
- disabilities

Knowledge and Understanding Specifications

PRINCIPLES and METHODS relating to:

- obtaining information from candidates through interviewing
- evaluating information from CVs, letters, references, interviews and aptitude/work sample tests against criteria
- keeping records of proceedings and outcomes
- applying relevant items of legislation and organisational rules to actual/typical circumstances

DATA relating to:

- the type of information which should be contained in CVs, application forms etc
- the demands of the job/role - the selection criteria related to the post
- interview procedures in the organisation
- the advantages/disadvantages of the post to the candidate

IV DEGREE STANDARDS AND QUALITY ASSURANCE: A DISCUSSION

Robin Middlehurst

Introduction

Over the past year, the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) has been undertaking a series of consultations and investigations about degree standards in the UK, on behalf of higher education's representative bodies. This paper sets out some of the issues which have given rise to the work - which is collectively known as the 'Graduate Standards' programme - and seeks to draw out some implications for quality assurance in the future.

Context

The topic of 'degree standards' (ie the level of student attainment that is expected, achieved and denoted by the award of an undergraduate degree) is complex and touches on issues which relate both to the heart of academic practice and to the wider expectations that society has of higher education. At the outset it is useful to try and unravel some of the strands which have led to HEQC's current programme. There are four themes which are prominent in the 'standards debate'.

The comparability of degrees

As Silver and Williams observe in their paper in this volume, the UK higher education system has maintained a belief that all degrees in the UK reflect broadly comparable levels of intellectual development and achievement. Recently, as the system has expanded and diversified, this belief has been called into question. The reasons for doubt in 1995 (in contrast to 1975) include: double the numbers of students emerging with degrees (the majority still drawn from social classes 1-3); students entering higher education with different educational backgrounds; students learning in a variety of contexts (home, work, further education, overseas); fewer students experiencing higher education as three years of full-time study; degree programmes now representing a variety of different learning packages. Given these changes, the questions asked by government and others have sought to identify whether or not 'broad comparability' of degrees across subjects and institutions still exists; and if it does not, within what boundaries might it be expected and achieved?

Security and reliability of degrees

Closely linked to the issue of comparability is that of reliability of degree standards. A degree is a form of currency which has traditionally had both immediate tradable value in relation to employment or further study and also longer term value for career development and professional status. Concerns about the reliability of degrees (and the various classifications within an honours system) focus both on their tradable value as a currency within the higher education and employment markets and also on the security of the internal systems and values which

ensure that the currency is relatively 'fixed' rather than floating.

Doubt has been expressed in several quarters as to whether a degree from all UK higher education institutions currently reflects, reliably and consistently, a particular level of intellectual attainment and other 'graduate level' characteristics. The seeds of doubt include: some employers' (and professional bodies') perceptions that there is variability in the abilities of graduates with the same degree class from different institutions; views from academic staff that student assessment is under pressure and sometimes lacks rigour (eg the tailoring of assessment tasks to assist hard-pressed students; drift in marking scales); comparisons with some Erasmus students which reflect unfavourably on the standards of UK students; resource pressures: to recruit more (less well-prepared?) students, to reduce costly practical work, to reduce staff:student ratios with insufficient tailored learning resources to provide adequate support; pressures on external examiners who as traditional 'watchdogs' and 'whistle-blowers' often now do not have the time or breadth of experience across institutions to assure standards across all degrees.

These two sets of issues - comparability and reliability - have been the main 'presenting problems' behind HEQC's recent work on standards, undertaken through the Quality Audit process and in the 'Graduate Standards' programme (GSP). However, there are two further themes which may be of longer term significance when considering degree standards and their assurance in the future.

Nature and purpose of degrees

When standards are discussed in education, it is often on the basis that they reflect an immutable yardstick against which to judge performance in the present, past and future. At a time when the pace of change appears to be accelerating, we ought perhaps to be asking whether degree standards should be the same in 1995 or 2015 as in 1975? The nature of a degree has already changed from a period of full-time study for three, four or more years, in one or two discipline areas with subject knowledge and understanding as a primary focus. Some of the traditional purposes and focus of degrees have also changed in line with changes in employment, including academic employment. Expectations of what a degree is and what it fits graduates for continue to shift, just as expectations of school and further education are shifting. Overall trends appear to be towards a broader based education with specialisation delayed, and towards an education which contains a different balance of knowledge to 'know-how'.

Ownership and control of standards

Academics (and practitioners in some fields) have been the principal owners and controllers of standards in universities and colleges. They have exercised control through staff expertise, curriculum design, teaching and learning activities and student assessment and examination. When subject knowledge is a primary focus of degree-level education and academics are the subject experts, ownership and control of standards by academics is unlikely to be seriously disputed. However, when students want more choice and 'relevance' in their education, and when they are paying for it, when employers are becoming more demanding in their specific

requirements, and when tax-payers (with government as proxy) want to determine value for public money, the question of ownership and control of standards becomes disputed territory. The dispute tends to be manifested in calls for accountability. In short, the debate about degree standards represents one of the ways in which higher education is being called to account by a variety of interest groups for its place and contribution to the well-being of society in the next century.

Individual institutions and the sector as a whole will need to reflect on these four sets of issues when seeking to address the setting and assurance of degree standards, ie the levels of awards; the reliability and consistency of awards; expectations of what an award denotes; and accountability towards different stakeholders in relation to the definition, quality and quality assurance of awards.

Definitions

Public debates on both quality and standards have been dogged by confusion and disagreements about the definition of these terms. So what is meant by 'standards'? In a general sense, a standard is a more or less precise measure of performance/attainment at a particular level. However, the term is often used in the plural to denote a composite series of elements.

The phrase, 'academic standards' is such a composite term, although it is also used in a narrow, more specific sense. In a broad sense, academic standards comprise input, process and output elements. Input elements may include the entry

qualifications of students; process elements may relate to the quality and quantity of staff-student educational interaction; and output elements to the attainments of students. Together, these elements relate to performance in five principal areas:

- the conduct of academic staff (ie the professional code which underpins the way in which they teach and assess students; the level of expertise they have at the outset and which they deploy through teaching, and the way in which they continually develop their own knowledge in a particular area). These may be described both as input and process elements;

- the educational background, ability, motivation and learning approaches of students. These may be described both as input and process elements;

- curriculum design and content, learning activities and support for learning, and the assessment regime which, in combination, provide the academic framework which supports the attainment and measurement of standards. These may be described as process elements;

- the granting of an award and the recording of student attainment which is a symbolic representation of the achievement of a standard. This may be described as an output element;

- the institutional context which provides a framework for the articulation, assurance, maintenance and

enhancement of standards. This has a bearing on input, process and output elements.

The 'Graduate Standards' programme has concentrated on **degree standards** in the specific sense of output standards, ie what is denoted (in terms of level of intellectual attainment and 'graduate characteristics') by the award of a degree. Defining output standards is an important step in clarifying the relationships between all of the other elements and will also act as a means of focusing activities in each area. If academic standards in their broad sense are to be fully assured, however, all five areas will need to be addressed.

Stages in the articulation and assurance of standards

Arriving at a 'standard' for a degree involves several stages which have not always been explicit, systematic or formalised. They include:

- specification and articulation of the characteristics and level of performance required (this may well include specification of entry-level characteristics and potential as well as performance at exit/progression);
- design of an appropriate educational process;
- provision of teaching and learning support to enable expected performance levels to be achieved;

- measurement and recording of achievement against initial specifications;

- review of the whole process, including revision of expected and achieved 'standards'.

The process of arriving at standards for any other area of activity (eg teaching) is likely to follow a similar pattern.

Quality assurance, which is aimed at the reliability and security of standards, will need to focus on each of these elements and stages.

The initial outcomes of the 'Graduate Standards' programme suggest that current academic processes do not always operate in this systematic and explicit fashion, at least in part because the first stage of the process seems problematic. The first stage may sometimes be completely absent, in other cases it is not explicit, and in still other cases, it is only undertaken at the end of the process, rather than at the beginning (eg standards of performance emerge through a norm-referenced assessment process as student attainment is measured through cross-student comparisons undertaken by internal examiners within a single cohort of students, or through cross-student comparisons undertaken by external examiners across cohorts of students).

Standards-referents

Academic standards are determined in relation to certain referents (eg the performance of students is measured against one or more benchmarks). The interim findings of

the 'Graduate Standards' programme suggest that at least three models of approaches to the articulation and measurement of academic standards can be identified across subjects/disciplinary fields, although in practice, the models may overlap:

a cultural model - where standards are fluid and implicit, being constructed and negotiated through interactions between academic peers and through engagement by students and academics in an educational process which gradually reveals the underlying structures and concepts of the discipline alongside the 'standards' that are linked to the award of a degree in that subject;

a curriculum model - where standards are dependent on the acquisition and application of a defined body of knowledge and theory;

a cognitive model - where standards are embedded within the acquisition of certain general intellectual abilities which can be translated into subject-specific learning outcomes.

These three models may operationalise their approach to standards by using different kinds (or combinations) of benchmarks and measurement processes. These include measurement of standards against:

- the performance of other students (norm-referencing);

- the specification of outcomes where these may be determined by students, employers or a particular industry or professional body (criterion-referencing);

- the cultural expectations of a subject/discipline/practice, which may be implicit or explicit, as judged by expert and experienced practitioners (what might be termed 'experiential-referencing').

The GSP interim findings also suggest that assessment and measurement of student attainment is influenced by other factors, for example, what may be described as 'potential-referencing' such as the level of performance necessary to be able to conduct research or to be in the running for a research grant, or the level of performance necessary to undertake and succeed at professional competence examinations. Knowledge of individual students, their abilities, intellectual development and particular circumstances may also influence assessment practice.

The standard of a single award (eg an undergraduate degree) is also established in relationship to other awards (eg at sub-degree and post-graduate degree level, or in relation to other kinds of attainment which can be 'measured' and accredited, eg APL or APEL). The standard of a degree from a particular institution may also be coloured by market perceptions of institutional reputation.

For the most part, our findings suggest that the standards-referents used by academics are not always fully articulated except by means of marks and gradings which represent, but do not describe, expected and achieved levels of performance. The rationale behind the ascribing of marks and gradings is often missing, or at least is not always apparent or public. This provides a fundamental difficulty

where students, employers and tax-payers are seeking information about the nature, level and reliability of degree standards; it also makes it potentially more difficult for academics, as teachers and examiners, to achieve reliability, consistency and comparability in relation to standards (although fuller articulation is not by itself a guarantee of any of these). Questions may also be asked as to whether the referents in use are appropriate (eg research potential/research grant criteria when graduates are seeking to use a degree as a passport to employment outside higher education).

Other work undertaken by HEQC in a collaborative project with the National Health Service Executive and the Northern and Yorkshire Regional Health Authority (HEQC, 1994 & 1995) has examined the different quality specifications and interests of three stakeholders in the field of non-medical health-care education and training (ie professional/statutory bodies, HE institutions and the NHS as employer). The initial findings from this work suggest that there may be three relevant 'standards-referents' for a degree, particularly where the degree itself is a licence to enter professional practice: fitness for award, fitness for practice and fitness for employment. These three referents may have wider potential as a framework for degree standards in the future.

Comparability of degree standards

As has been indicated above, comparability has for long been a fundamental part of the articulation and measurement of standards (CNAA, 1992; CVCP, 1986). As the elements

that make up academic standards have become more diverse, the extent or range of comparability that is now appropriate has become uncertain. The GSP interim findings suggest that the notion of direct and precise comparability of degree standards across all degrees in all institutions may no longer be appropriate or feasible, and may even be undesirable since innovation and responsiveness to different market needs could be stifled.

Nonetheless, it is still necessary to establish some appropriate boundaries in which comparability of degree standards can be assessed - unless the standard of a degree is independent of any collective referents and is, in effect, a 'floating currency'.

If some comparability of degree standards is desirable, then the overall range of application needs to be determined, for example:

- all degrees of a particular type? (ordinary degrees, honours degrees);
- types of degrees within a subject field? (reflecting different purposes: vocational, theoretical/research-oriented, generalist);
- degrees in a subject area from institutions with similar missions and values?

The issue here is particularly one of level of intellectual/educational attainment and the extent to which the title 'degree' or 'degree honours' or 'degree (BA/BSc)', awarded at the end of different programmes in different

institutions represents a broadly comparable, or different, level of achievement.

Comparability also needs to be seen in relation to different dimensions, some of which may be easier to achieve than others. For example:

currricula (in some subjects, though by no means all, a core curriculum or core subject matter does or might exist at undergraduate level thus making comparability of degree standards more feasible);

assessment mode (national examinations across a range of core components is one method of assessing comparability);

skills (generic academic attributes/'graduateness', or subject-specific cognitive skills, or other kinds of learning outcomes such as personal or core skills may provide another dimension for comparability);

consistent processes (eg common agreement over levels of awards, over gradings and classification criteria, over marking practices and use of data, over credit-rating and over quality assurance systems including the purpose and role of external examiners).

The issue here is firstly about reliability and consistency of degree standards, ie identifying the dimensions across which it is feasible and appropriate to seek and assure comparisons. However, by also considering degree standards in terms of skills, which would be a new departure for higher education as a whole (although not for some subjects/programmes), it may also be possible to

address issues concerning the changing nature and purposes of degrees.

The next developmental stages of the GSP are aiming to test the feasibility of two 'range-factors' through a survey of the nomenclature and level of awards offered in higher education; and the design and testing of a possible typology of programmes. HEQC is also seeking, with institutions, to develop two of the above dimensions of comparability, ie 'graduateness' and also 'process dimensions' (the latter through some of HEQC's other activities such as the audit process, the review of external examining, and revision of the quality assurance guidelines).

Threshold standards for degrees

The notion of threshold standards was originally proposed by the CVCP as an alternative to the notion of 'broad comparability' of degrees. The rationale behind the proposition was that the increasing heterogeneity of higher education meant that a variety of standards could be tolerated but that a bottom line must be established (ie when is a degree not a degree?). In practice, this notion does not avoid comparability since assessment of threshold standards also requires measurement against benchmarks and particular referents. Perhaps the distinctive characteristics of **threshold** standards are:

- that these denote minimum levels of acceptability;
- that they imply progression (ie a threshold for entry to...); and

- that they require more explicit specification (or criterion, rather than norm-referencing).

The GSP interim findings suggest that the concept of threshold standards in a literal sense (ie the distinction between failure to obtain a degree and a bare pass) is, to most academics working within an honours classification system, unfamiliar and/or problematic because it has little to do with daily practice (exceptions being in medicine and some other professional fields, and in Scotland). The honours classification system makes the concept and practice of threshold standards difficult because:

- academics (in different subjects) appear to judge performance within honours degrees according to a notion of 'satisfactoriness' which tends to fall somewhere in the second class honours category; is this level then to be the 'minimum' or should there be thresholds for each classification?

- the bases or criteria for making judgements of 'satisfactoriness' are not transparent and explicit so that it is difficult to know whether they would be acceptable to the sector as a whole (and other interested parties) as representing appropriate threshold standards;

- it appears from current evidence that the 'potential-referent' in use by many academics when making judgements of 'satisfactoriness' (or to put it another way, the 'progression element' in their judgements) is based on research-related or professior-related

criteria (eg evidence of ability to conduct research or to undertake professional competence exams). Is this appropriate for all degrees?

If threshold standards are to be introduced, the following issues will need to be clarified:

- the level at which these explicit standards are set;
- the potential impact of threshold standards on the honours classification system;
- the application of threshold standards, including their dimensions (eg skills, processes) and range (all degrees of one type: ordinary, honours; and/or clusters of degrees);
- the appropriate referents for threshold standards (eg research and/or further learning; professional practice, employment).

Some principles and assumptions

In order to find a way forward, certain assumptions or principles need to be made at the outset. Some are already part of the existing standards framework, for example:

- continuing institutional autonomy in the granting of awards;
- continued diversity of programmes;

- continued external involvement in the design of programmes and negotiation of content where appropriate; external involvement in accreditation where relevant and external involvement in quality assessment. ['External' may need to include: professional bodies, peers from other institutions, employer and student representation.]

However, others may be novel or potentially more controversial, for example:

- degrees should reflect the range of purposes that they are used for: professional preparation and up-dating, employment preparation, subject interest, general education;

- the title and award level of degrees should be more clearly articulated;

- the assessment of students and the measurement and recording of their performance should be transparent, comprehensive and clear to all parties;

- the purposes and objectives of quality assurance arrangements and the roles and responsibilities of those involved should be clearly articulated;

- quality assurance at institutional and national levels should be fit for purpose and capable of development;

- progress should be made by building on what currently exists except where current practice is either not working or is demonstrably unacceptable to relevant parties.

A framework for the articulation, assurance and development of standards

In this final section, a number of issues are discussed which relate both to the findings of the 'Graduate Standards' programme and to the present discussions about a revised system of external quality assurance in higher education. The outcomes of these deliberations are as yet unclear, but many of the issues which will need to be addressed are already obvious. The discussion is framed around the 'standards cycle' described above, ie specification of standards; design of an educational process; provision of teaching and learning support; measurement and recording of achievement; review and further development.

Specification and articulation of standards

The key issues here involve firstly, the form of standards in the future - will they be uniform across the sector or will they vary according to disciplinary field, programme type and institution? Secondly, will standards be of the threshold variety (or not) and if they are, will they be both generic and subject/programme specific, or will they be cast only in terms of process (eg marking process, credit-ratings etc). Will they relate to personal and so-called 'core skills' as well as to subject knowledge and understanding?

A third issue at this point is the relationship between the standards (of student performance) and the awards and classifications associated with successful performance. Will the titles and levels of awards, and their inter-relationships, need to be more clearly articulated, including alignment internationally? Is a national framework of awards (linked, perhaps to a national credit framework) a realisable proposition? Fourthly, if clarity of output standards is expected, what impact will this have on the specification of input and process standards?

Perhaps the most important and most difficult issues relate to the locus of responsibility for defining standards, the nature of this process and its quality assurance at various levels. At present, responsibility is shared between academics at course team/programme level, within a cross-institutional peer-group framework at subject level; by institutions/faculties through their design of curriculum frameworks and quality assurance arrangements for programme approval and validation; and by professional and statutory bodies. In some cases, employers and external examiners may also be involved. Quality Audit also provides a check on the effectiveness of the relevant institutional systems. As modular degree-structures become the norm, the relationship between 'subject' standards at the unit level and standards at the programme/award level will further spread the responsibilities for articulating standards.

For the future, at least two axes will be significant: the relationship between individual institutions and the collectivity of institutions and the ways in which they will seek (or not) to share responsibility for the specification and articulation of standards; and the relationship between

individual programme providers and their wider peer-group, also in terms of responsibilities and interactions in the articulation of standards. Increasingly, students and employers will need to find a means of influencing these two dimensions.

Design of an educational process

This stage has been a shared responsibility (although not always overtly so) between the institution through its curriculum frameworks and the work of relevant professionals, including academic staff, library, computer and technical support staff. In professional areas, the relevant professional and statutory body may also be involved. A key function in relation to this stage of the cycle is to ensure that the design of the educational process is appropriate to the achievement of relevant standards and learning objectives and, in terms of quality assurance, that evidence of the effectiveness of the process is regularly collected and tested.

Within current external quality assurance processes (particularly Teaching Quality Assessment) the programme providers in subject areas are examined on this stage of the cycle, albeit not necessarily explicitly. A major potential difference between current and future practice is that Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA), which is now linked to the 'standards-referents' of the programme provider and home institution, could in future be linked more explicitly to any collective standards which emerge.

Provision of teaching and learning support

Once again, this is a matter for institutions to determine, however student charters have indicated broad areas of rights and responsibilities and HEQC guidelines have offered supplementary advice to institutions. The level and methods of teaching and learning support which are necessary and appropriate for students to enable them to reach the expected standards of attainment associated with their awards are clearly likely to vary. However, a great deal of work remains to be done in order to reach a fuller and more refined understanding and application of this stage of the cycle in relation to different groups of students and programmes and in relation to the continuing development of staff experience and expertise.

At present, external quality assurance, particularly TQA, focuses on the provision of teaching and learning support in relation to the programme provider's aims and objectives. Once again, if collective standards emerge, then any new external quality assurance process is likely to seek evidence of the effectiveness of teaching and learning support in relation to the achievement of these expected output standards. The role that peer review will play in any new process, and the role of externals other than peers, is yet to be determined alongside the means of developing and assuring expertise in this area.

Measurement and recording of achievement

Internal and external examiners play a key part in this phase of the standards' cycle. The appropriate relationship between the two and their relative responsibilities are still being worked out within institutions and at national level.

Key issues include the reliability and validity of assessment practices and, for the future, the ways in which collective (threshold?) standards will be measured, recorded and verified. Given the pressures for external accountability signalled through external quality assurance arrangements, the relationship between external examiners (who are currently selected and 'owned' by institutions/faculties) and national QA arrangements will be critical.

A number of issues remain unsettled, for example, relationships between module standards and the relevant award; the potential implications of threshold standards for the future operation of the honours classification system; the reliability and transparency of current methods of recording student achievement, given the diversity of degrees and their varied purposes; the impact of international (student) mobility and discontinuous education patterns on credit frameworks and the transfer of credit. In each of these areas, locating and articulating responsibilities, particularly when several stakeholders are involved or when institutions differ in their conceptions of what is appropriate and necessary for the purposes of accountability, is not an easy matter. Assuring the quality of the whole process of measuring and recording standards in terms of reliability and consistency across the whole sector, is still more difficult.

Review of the processes of articulating, assuring and developing standards

As current programme review procedures recognise, standards are not permanent and static, but will need to be reviewed, re-negotiated and articulated afresh at regular intervals. At present this is largely an internal institutional

matter, although external examiners and professional bodies (through re-accreditation) may also be involved and external quality assurance arrangements (through Quality Audit) check that the process takes place and is effective. In the future, if collective standards emerge in whatever form, there will need to be a regular means of reviewing and developing them. A review cycle might take place within two, three or five years; the timing might also vary in different disciplinary fields.

For the future, key issues include defining the relationships between institutional, peer-group/expert, and national level responsibilities for this stage of the standards' cycle. Institutions will wish to have their own review processes and will also need to demonstrate the effectiveness of their processes to external bodies. At peer group/expert level (which might be located within subject associations or professional bodies), a review process will also need to exist if collective standards emerge. There may be a further role at this level in assuring the expertise and experience of those experts involved in peer review processes either at institutional or national levels (such as programme approval/review; assessment of teaching and learning; or external examining). National responsibilities at present include developing relevant external QA structures and processes; establishing roles, responsibilities and reporting arrangements for those involved; maintaining relevant data-bases and reporting on the outcomes of the processes, individually and collectively across the sector.

Conclusions

At present, there are a number of elements in the framework described above which do not exist, and/or which will need to be negotiated, and/or which may need to be developed or changed. As discussed, some of these elements relate to the form that standards will take; relationships between output standards and input and process elements; the various forms of internal and external quality assurance, including the place and role of external examiners; the nature of peers/experts who are involved in review processes; and the future shape of a higher education award/credit framework.

Higher education is the only part of the education system in the UK where the major elements of the 'standards' cycle' rest in the same hands: academics set standards, teach to them, measure and record student performance against them and review programmes and their standards at periodic intervals. Where 'externals' are involved in these processes, they are often other academics. This traditional framework is part of the heritage of institutional autonomy and academic freedom and represents a formidable set of responsibilities. The development of external quality assurance (beyond external examining and professional accreditation) was a first indication that parts of this framework were being challenged; the questions and issues that underpin the debate about degree standards are a second and stronger indication. It is essential that individual academics, professional and peer group networks, and institutions individually and collectively consider very

seriously the implications of the standards debate and that they pay particular attention to their roles and responsibilities within the 'standards' cycle' if institutional autonomy and academic freedom are to be protected in the future.

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Other QSC Publications

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Higher education is changing rapidly - not only in the UK but all over the world. Reading the *Higher Education Digest* is an effective means of keeping up-to-date and informed about new developments and issues which affect higher education. Since the first issue in 1987, the *Digest* has become one of the most widely read publications by academics, administrators and managers within higher education. It is also of interest to people in other sectors of education, in industry and in government who wish to keep abreast of the latest higher education developments.

Each issue contains over 50 items, ranging from general educational policy to developments within specific disciplines. Items are grouped under general themes such as:

- quality assurance
- teaching, learning and assessment
- curriculum development
- staff development
- policy and funding
- recent statistics
- international developments

It also contains details of recent journals and forthcoming conferences.

Questions of Quality: in Europe and Beyond, QSC Higher Education Report No. 1, John Brennan and Frans van Vught, October 1993, price £7.50.

This report contains two papers which examine international aspects of quality in higher education from contrasting perspectives.

The first paper entitled 'Higher education quality: a European dimension' is by John Brennan, Head of the Quality Support Centre. It looks at the various 'needs' and 'opportunities' for higher education institutions to be active in Europe and the implications for quality which they raise. It goes on to review the results of recent studies of the comparative quality of educational programmes in several European countries.

The second paper is entitled 'Towards a general model of quality assessment in higher education', by Frans van Vught, Director of the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies at the Dutch University of Twente. It examines the various systems of quality assessment and assurance which have been developed in North America and Western Europe and, out of them, sets out a general model of quality assessment in higher education.

Managerialism and the Academic Profession: Quality and Control, QSC Higher Education Report No 2, 1994, Professor Martin Trow, price £7.50.

In this report, Professor Martin Trow presents a critique of the new arrangements for the external assessment of teaching and research established following the publication of the 1991 White Paper *Higher Education: A New Framework.*

Professor Trow argues that the new arrangements are deeply flawed, that they seriously misunderstand the nature of teaching and learning in higher education, and that they are potentially damaging to the future maintenance and enhancement of the quality of British higher education. He cites them as examples of a new form of 'hard managerialism' being introduced into British higher education. The report makes proposals for alternative approaches to the maintenance and enhancement of quality in higher education.

The report also contains a response to Professor Trow's argument by Paul Clark, Director of the Quality Assessment Division at the Higher Education Funding Council for England.

Professor Trow is Professor of Public Policy at the Graduate School of Public Policy, University of California at Berkeley. He has published many books and articles on higher education policy.

Peer Review and the Assessment of Higher Education Quality: An International Perspective, QSC Higher Education Report No 3, 1994, John Brennan, Elaine El-Khawas and Tarla Shah, price £7.50.

This report is the result of an international project on the role of peer review in assessing quality in higher education. The project was undertaken jointly by the American Council on Education and the Quality Support Centre of the Open University in the UK.

The project set out to describe the main variations in the practice of peer review as used by over twenty agencies - primarily in Europe and the United States - which, in different ways, occupy boundaries between higher education and other parts of society, most notably the state and the labour market.

John Brennan and Tarla Shah are Head and Centre Administrator respectively of the Quality Support Centre, Open University, and Elaine El-Khawas is Vice President for Policy Analysis and Research in the American Council on Education.

Quality and Europe: Papers presented at a conference held in London on 29 November 1993, 1994, Greta Bradley and Brenda Little (Eds), price £7.50.

Three main issues underlay the conference theme, viz: the mutual recognition of qualifications and periods of study to facilitate student and graduate mobility within Europe; the importance of foreign language competence in breaking down economic and cultural barriers within the Community; and the development of a European dimension in higher education.

The aim of the conference was to explore UK experience of these developments to date, to take stock of difficulties and successes encountered, and to be mindful of ways forward for the future.

Contents are: *Overview* (Greta Bradley, Hull University, and Brenda Little, Quality Support Centre); *Quality and Europe* (Timothy Boswell, Minister for Further and Higher Education); *Student Mobility in Europe* (Ulrich Teichler, University of Kassel in Germany); *ERASMUS at Hull University* (Greta Bradley, Hull University); *Intercultural Dimensions in the Management and Development of European Student Mobility Programmes* (David French, Coventry University); *Quality Assurance in University-Wide Language Programmes* (Marianne Howarth, The Nottingham Trent University); *The European Community Course Credit Transfer System (ECTS)* (Richard Whewell, University of Strathclyde); *Comparative Studies of Higher Education Quality* (John Brennan, Quality Support Centre); *The European Commission's Proposals for Education and Training Programmes for 1995 and Beyond* (Elizabeth

Ogden, European Commission's Task Force for Human Resources, Education, Training and Youth).

Students, Courses and Jobs: A Conference Report, Ruth Williams (Ed), 1994, price £5.00.

The conference was based on a recent major study by the former Council for National Academic Awards which explored the experiences and views of graduates up to eight years after leaving college or university. The study examined the relationship between higher education and the labour market, including the success with which different types of courses prepared their students for jobs, and the implications for quality assurance.

Contents are: *The Study - Students, Courses and Jobs* (John Brennan, Quality Support Centre, Stina Lyon, South Bank University); *The Employer Perspective* (Margaret Murray, Confederation of British Industry); *An Institutional Perspective* (Frank Griffiths, Leeds Metropolitan University); *Collecting the Data* (Phil McGeevor, South Bank University); *Enterprise in Higher Education* (Peter Wright, Higher Education Quality Council); *The Changing Graduate Labour Market* (Gill Court, Institute of Manpower Studies); *The Implications for the Careers Service* (Bob Porrer, University of Edinburgh); *The Circumstances and Aspirations of Mature Students* (Jim Zacune, Staffordshire University); *Reflections on the Day's Discussions* (Maurice Kogan, Brunel University).

Using External Examiners, Harold Silver and Ruth Williams, 1994, price £5.00.

This report is the outcome of a project commissioned by the Open University Validation Services and undertaken by QSC. The report considers the main strengths of external examining ("justice, standards and comparability") and some of the concerns which have been expressed about the impact on external examining of recent developments in higher education. Concerns include workload, recruitment, institutional expectations and remuneration. The report also considers the role of external examiners in credit-rated institutions and other professional bodies.

Although directed towards institutions accredited by Open University Validation Services, the report contains recommendations that will be of interest more widely, particularly to institutions involved in collaborative provision.

Harold Silver is a Visiting Professor and Ruth Williams is a Projects and Development Officer in the Open University's Quality Support Centre. They have recently completed a major project for the Higher Education Quality Council on the future of the external examiner system in UK higher education.

Guidelines on Self-Evaluation, John Brennan, Malcolm Frazer and Ruth Williams, 1995, price £5.00.

The *Guidelines* have been prepared to assist institutions accredited by Open University Validation Services in carrying out self-evaluation of their teaching and related activities. However, they are relevant to anyone preparing to undertake a self-evaluation (or self-study, self-assessment) of teaching. Some elements of the *Guidelines* can also be applied to self-evaluation for other purposes eg research, support functions.

The *Guidelines* are presented under the following headings: *Purposes*; *Planning*; *Assembling the information and evidence*; *Judgements*; *Reporting*; *Actions and monitoring*.

Towards a Methodology for Comparative Quality Assessment in European Higher Education, J L Brennan, L C J Goedegebuure, T Shah, D F Westerheijden, P J M Weusthof, 1992, CNAA/QSC/OU, CHEPS, HIS, price £7.00.

This CNAA publication from 1992 has been reprinted by QSC. It examines the possibility of making reliable and valid comparisons of the quality of higher education courses in different European countries. It contains the results of a comparative study of ten economics programmes in England, Germany and The Netherlands which involved an international peer review by leading economists.

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